

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

JOURNAL SENTINEL

To the judges:

The City of Milwaukee's program to combat childhood lead poisoning has long been considered a national model. The perception: It was filled with diligent workers and efficient managers, overseen by officials with a deep dedication to protecting vulnerable children in some of the city's poorest, most neglected neighborhoods.

A series of investigative reports in 2018 by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel showed that, under a neglectful health commissioner, the reality was the opposite.

As reporters Mary Spicuzza and Dan Bice were pursuing tips about Health Commissioner Bevan Baker's poor management of the department, Baker was abruptly fired. It quickly became clear that problems in the city's lead testing program were among the issues. Science reporter Mark Johnson pitched in on key early stories; Spicuzza and Bice launched an effort to expose what went wrong, who knew about it and why the problems were allowed to fester.

The two reporters filed some three dozen open-records requests, met privately with current and former health department employees, reviewed thousands of pages of emails, text messages, disciplinary files and other records.

They found themselves whipsawed between the administration and the city council, which were engaged in a public mess of finger-pointing and retribution. Their open records requests were routinely slow-walked, leaked to other reporters first, or simply ignored.

The interim health commissioner, appointed by the council, declared on a radio program: "I do not respond to Dan Bice or Mary Whatever-her-name-is because... I do not respond."

They pushed forward.

They revealed the city failed to take some of the most basic steps to protect children with lead poisoning and to prevent others from being put in danger. They disclosed that high-ranking health officials were aware of the problems and intentionally hid them from the public and elected officials. They showed that over a five-month period, the Health Department was only able to make needed repairs at five homes. Instead, aides to Baker were working to protect his reputation. They found that one city staffer purposefully stalled the cleanup of homes.

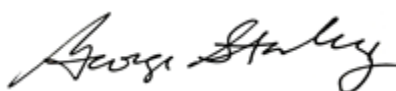
In one case, twins who had been treated for the effects of lead poisoning were sent back into an unsafe home.

They revealed outrage after outrage.

Among the revelations: That the once-proud health department was under criminal investigation.

Thank you for considering the work of reporters Mary Spicuzza, Dan Bice and Mark Johnson for the Wisconsin FOIA Council's "Scoop of the Year."

Sincerely,



George Stanley
Editor and Senior Vice President
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Lead in the water

**A Journal Sentinel
Watchdog Report**

Lead in the Water

January 13, 2018



Milwaukee Health Commissioner Bevan K. Baker is shown last April. Baker resigned on Thursday.

Health chief out over lead tests

By Mary Spicuzza and Mark Johnson,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Milwaukee Health Commissioner Bevan Baker left his job at City Hall as word broke Friday that his department failed to follow up and provide services to the families of thousands of children who had tested positive for lead.

Mayor Tom Barrett said he had identified “mismanagement” in

the health department that had left him “deeply disturbed” and “angry.”

“I expect more,” Barrett said at a Friday news conference. “Our residents expect more.”

The mayor said Baker resigned Thursday.

“Late yesterday Bevan Baker and I agreed it is time for new

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leadership at the health department, and I accepted his resignation,” Barrett said.

The mayor said he asked former health commissioner Paul Nannis to serve as interim department administrator. A national search will be launched soon, Barrett added.

Each year, 25,000 Milwaukee children are tested for lead and 3,000 on average come back with elevated lead levels.

Used in water pipes until the 1920s and in the solder connecting copper piping until the 1980s, lead can flake into drinking water, damaging a child’s growth and ability to learn.

Tens of thousands of Milwaukee homes may contain lead paint, and many city houses built before 1951 are believed to receive water from street mains through lead pipes known as a laterals.

An activist group known as the Freshwater for Life Action Coalition has been pushing city officials to do more to combat Milwaukee’s lead problems.

In a joint statement, Milwaukee aldermen expressed outrage about the health department’s failure on the lead results.

“Today members of the Common Council learned that officers of the Milwaukee Health Department failed to ensure adequate notification of thousands of families whose children

tested positive for elevated lead levels in their blood,” the statement reads. “This is an egregious public health failure that was in direct non-compliance with procedures put forth by Common Council resolution.”

Council members vowed to “hold the executive branch accountable for this very serious failure” and said they will launch their own investigation.

Baker’s exit, 13 years after he was sworn in, came as he faced mounting criticism for his handling of Milwaukee’s lead poisoning problem and his leadership of the health department.

His departure also follows stark warnings from former employees about retaliation and a hostile work environment at the department.

Paul Biedrzycki, who retired in June from his job as Milwaukee’s director of disease control and environmental health, described the work environment as “hostile” and “retaliatory.”

“There’s clearly something happening at the health department,” Biedrzycki said. “People are leaving. There’s something wrong.”

Biedrzycki said the department’s methods of retaliation have included disinviting people from meetings concerning areas they specialize in, and forbidding employees to travel to conferences or to give presentations at conferences.

He added that at least seven

health department staffers have left in recent months.

One former employee, Benjamin James, emailed Barrett and all 15 aldermen late last month alerting them to a retaliatory work environment at the department and problems with the city's Lead Poisoning Prevention program.

James wrote in his Dec. 28 email that he had repeatedly "questioned the lack of water testing at lead-poisoned children's homes" despite assurances from health officials.

That same day, Baker responded to the email promising aldermen "please know that I have taken immediate action regarding the issues referenced in the correspondence."

James could not be reached by the Journal Sentinel for an interview.

The exchange prompted Ald. Michael Murphy to press for answers.

Murphy warned in a Jan. 4 email that James' comments "contained several significant and disturbing allegations."

"Please provide a detailed account of the issues raised and how these concerns were addressed, what solutions have been implemented, and what punitive actions were

taken," Murphy wrote.

Ald. Tony Zielinski had also battled with the health department for months over his measure to overhaul the city's recommendations for avoiding lead exposure in drinking water, including urging women of childbearing age to use water filters.

After months of wrangling and adjustments, the resolution passed late last year.

Last week, Zielinski pressed for updates on the measure's implementation, including media advisories, community updates and written recommendations. As of Friday, he was still waiting for a response.

"This is obviously a tremendous problem," said Zielinski, a 2020 mayoral candidate. "The Common Council is going to conduct a detailed investigation of this matter. What we must do is ensure the safety of all our children."

Baker was sworn-in as health commissioner in August 2004 and reconfirmed for another term in 2008.

During his tenure, Baker oversaw the city's swift response to the swine flu epidemic and its effort to improve Milwaukee's high infant mortality rate.

Lead in the Water

January 21, 2018

City expert raised lead concerns nearly 3 years ago

By Mark Johnson, Mary Spicuzza and Daniel Bice,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Nearly three years ago, a city expert alerted Mayor Tom Barrett's top health official of the looming threat facing thousands of Milwaukee children who get their drinking water from antiquated lead pipes.

The memo with its warning — that replacing water mains would disturb the pipes and significantly raise lead levels — went nowhere.

"I firmly believed that my summary would create a sense of urgency and action on the part of the city in short order," said Paul Biedrzycki, who retired in June after years as the city's director of disease control and environmental health. When that didn't happen, he



Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett.

said, "I was dumbfounded."

His 2015 memo went straight to then-Health Commissioner Bevan Baker in preparation for a meeting with the mayor and Milwaukee Water Works Superintendent Carrie Lewis.

In a lengthy interview in

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which Barrett at one point fought back tears, the mayor said Baker never passed along the memo or summarized its list of recommendations. Baker, who did not return repeated calls over the last week, was forced from his post earlier this month as news broke that his agency failed to provide follow-up services to thousands of families with children who had tested positive for lead.

“This is the first time I’ve seen this, just so you’re aware,” Barrett said of the Biedrzycki memo dated April 1, 2015. Lewis, who is now general manager of the Portland Maine Water District, said she could not remember whether Biedrzycki’s recommendations ever came up during the meeting.

Even without seeing the memo, Barrett said in 2015 he began urging homeowners with lead laterals affected by water main replacements to use filters.

In February 2016, city officials mailed 70,000 letters urging people to flush their pipes and buy lead filters.

Seven months later, Barrett made lead filters a personal priority by holding an impromptu news conference calling on all owners and residents of homes built before 1951 to use them. The city has since begun distributing limited supplies of free water filters to low-income residents of homes with lead service lines.

Widespread use of water filters was one of the recommendations included in Biedrzycki’s memo.

Ald. Michael Murphy said he was struck with “the urgency” conveyed in the memo sent to Baker and how that didn’t get passed along to the mayor.

“I’m still perplexed and somewhat amazed how that could have fallen through the cracks,” Murphy said. “I’ll take the mayor’s comments at face value, but to me, it just seems fairly amazing that that had not been communicated — the seriousness of that issue — to him.”

Lead, widely used in water pipes until the 1920s and in the solder connecting copper piping until the 1980s, can flake into drinking water, damaging a child’s growth and ability to learn. Each year, 25,000 Milwaukee children are tested for lead poisoning and an average of 3,000 per year are found to have elevated levels. Lead paint is widely considered to be the primary source of lead poisoning in Milwaukee.

‘Epiphany’

The mayor referred to his September 2016 decision on the water filters as a personal “epiphany” after participating in a forum with Marc Edwards, a professor of civil engineering from Virginia Tech and one of the country’s leading experts on water quality issues. Barrett

said he knew little about the ill effects of lead in drinking water when the crisis in Flint, Mich., raised the issue nationally in 2014.

In his interview with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Barrett denied that his administration intentionally delayed its response to lead-poisoning concerns for fear of causing a panic before the spring 2016 election.

The city mailed out 70,000 letters to Milwaukee residents warning of possible risks of lead exposure from pipes shortly before his primary. Five months after being elected to a fourth term, the Milwaukee Democrat went further, calling for use of water filters in older homes throughout the city.

Growing emotional, the mayor said he would not have put his own family at risk for the sake of political expediency.

“So if you think, if you think, that I did this — my house was built in 1916 — if you think that I would have kept this from my wife and kids,” Barrett said, referring to past criticism that the city covered up the extent of its lead problem. “I was just so offended that you think I would do that to my kids, or any child in this city.”

Barrett said he has been candid with voters, explaining, “The consistency in my actions at every juncture is when I learn something that I felt the public

should know, my directive was let the public know.”

In short, Barrett added, “If I’m telling my wife, I’m telling the public.”

If the mayor was largely unaware of the issue three years ago, the same cannot be said of some officials in the city Health Department.

“Precedent has been set for water utilities providing water filters to customers affected by partial lead service line replacement projects and doing followup monitoring of in-home drinking water,” Benjamin James, then-city lead project coordinator, wrote in an email on Feb. 20, 2015, to several health offices.

Two months later, Baker asked Biedrzycki to prepare a “brief” for his meeting with the mayor on the issue of lead service lines.

Warning sounded

Biedrzycki, who has spent 25 years working on lead and water issues, warned Baker that the city would risk “significant increase in lead concentrations in drinking water” if it moved forward with the large water main distribution project that would disturb lead service lines, the pipes that carry water to individual homes

Then Biedrzycki went further, suggesting that both the state Division of Public Health and the regional office of the

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency agreed that the best solution for the city would be “full replacement of lead service lines.”

He also suggested, in the meantime, the use of drinking filters, routine testing of drinking water and flushing of the water plumbing prior to drinking water or using it for cooking.

“Any increase in lead exposure through increase in concentrations within drinking water would be considered adverse by public health authorities and unacceptable,” Biedrzycki concluded. “This is especially important to note given the tremendous strides the city has made to reduce lead poisoning in young children.”

An EPA chemist, Michael Schock, offered a chilling image of the health care risks still faced by many Milwaukee homeowners and residents.

“Basically, people with lead pipes are drinking the water through permanently lead-painted straws, even with good corrosion control in place,” Schock wrote Biedrzycki in June 2015.

Rather than pursuing remedies, however, the Barrett administration focused its efforts in 2015 on conducting its own pilot study. The city set out to determine whether replacing water mains would disturb the lead service lines and boost lead levels in drinking water.

That move came after the state’s utility agency in 2014 required Milwaukee to replace at least 15 miles of water mains a year.

At the Milwaukee Water Works, Lewis announced plans to do the pilot study in March 2015, a month after informing health officials of the water main project.

Almost from the beginning, city and state health officials questioned the study.

“We are not sure of the exact intent of the pilot in terms of outcomes and usefulness,” Biedrzycki wrote to Lewis at the time.

For one thing, the sample size was small. Only six of the 21 homes invited to participate agreed to do so.

“The pilot wasn’t supposed to be statistically significant,” Lewis said, stressing that the point was to learn whether the construction work would raise lead levels. Given that the work did, she added, “Don’t you think one house would have been enough?”

But there was a more fundamental problem.

By 2015, there was already little doubt that replacing mains was likely to increase the lead in drinking water. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had five years earlier warned health leaders across the country that early study results suggested partial replacement

of lead service lines risked increasing blood-lead levels in children.

Schock, the EPA chemist, was more emphatic.

“There is no doubt that partial lead service line replacements can result in significantly elevated levels of lead in tap water and that this contamination can continue for weeks and months,” he told the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

Over the next few years, more published studies reached much the same conclusion, even warning that merely “disturbing” the lines would increase lead levels.

“Although other factors could also influence lead levels, the highest lead results most often were associated with sites having known disturbances to the lead service lines,” wrote the authors of a Chicago study published in 2013 in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology*.

The study was one of several Biedrzycki said he shared with a member of the mayor’s staff, Aaron Szopinski, and fellow health agency colleagues. Szopinski said he does not recall receiving the note.

The study focused on replacing water mains, not lead service lines; experts say doing one affects the other.

Replacing water mains “means the lead service lines

will be disturbed. You are doing heavy construction. There will be shaking and vibrations,” Edwards, the national expert from Virginia Tech, said in an interview. “This is a hazardous material and there are chunks of lead that can dislodge and will undoubtedly come into the home.”

Edwards said the safest practice is for communities to replace all of the lead service lines. As for the necessity of conducting the pilot study to determine whether water main replacement would increase lead levels in the drinking water, he said:

“Unless they’ve been living in a bunker with earmuffs on, they should know that,” he said.

Biedrzycki said the results of the studies were as expected: lead concentrations in the water rose during the water main work — sometimes sharply. In most cases, the levels returned to their baseline a week or two after construction. Some studies have suggested the spike in lead levels can last much longer.

In his interview, Barrett sought to portray the pilot’s small sample size as a measure of his concern for safety.

In January 2016, he ordered a moratorium, or “pause,” on water main replacement projects in older residential neighborhoods where lead pipes connect municipal water mains to homes based on what his staff

had found in the small collection of Milwaukee houses that participated in the study.

“I will use that as a sign of how serious I take this,” Barrett said. “I changed the policy of this city based on six houses.”

Barrett acknowledged that he is ultimately responsible for the city’s response to lead water concerns and, in general, is proud of the work being done by his administration. He went so far as to say Milwaukee is “in the vanguard” on the issue.

The city spent about \$6.6 million on some 600 full lead lateral replacements in 2017 and included \$8.8 million in its 2018 budget to fund 800 full lead lateral replacements. It has spent or budgeted another \$435,000 on lead filters and testing since 2016.

If Biedrzycki had a problem with the city’s approach, the mayor said, the health expert should have made that known.

“Paul’s a smart guy and he’s a great communicator,” Barrett said. “If this was a life-and-death issue, why didn’t he get an empty envelope, or an envelope with no name on it, saying, ‘You’re screwing up big time. Deal with this.’”

Or, even better, Barrett said Biedrzycki could have gone to the second floor at City Hall to let his concerns be known directly to the mayor.

“I’m not the Wizard of Oz here,” Barrett said. “I don’t kick

people out of here, and I’m a pretty approachable guy.”

Biedrzycki said it was impressed upon him during his years with the city that he had to follow the chain of command and that it would have been unacceptable for him to go over Baker’s head to bring his concerns to the mayor. In addition, Biedrzycki said one of his supervisors at the city Health Department made it clear that it was important to put up a unified front.

Barrett officials pushed back by providing copies of an email Biedrzycki sent to Szopinski, the mayoral aide, in January 2016 crediting Szopinski for his leadership. Biedrzycki attached a proposed newspaper column he penned declaring Milwaukee’s drinking water “safe” and of “the highest quality in the country.”

It doesn’t appear the article was ever published.

The mayor and his staff described the note as unsolicited, but the exchange actually started with an email from Szopinski saying he was impressed with Biedrzycki’s “ability to come together to deal with tough problems and continue to demonstrate leadership.”

Biedrzycki said he wrote the proposed op-ed at the urging of Patrick Curley, the chief of staff to Barrett, something Curley denies.

Curley went on to say that

Biedrzycki oversaw the city's childhood lead prevention program now under investigation by the mayor's office and aldermen.

While he would not discuss details, Curley said, "The investigation to date shows that there were problems going back to 2015 with the follow-up to families where children had elevated lead-blood levels."

Biedrzycki said he did not manage the childhood lead prevention program but supervised

the person who did.

"Under no circumstances was I aware of anything in my tenure that smacked of non-notification," Biedrzycki said, noting that in 2016 the city received a \$3.4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for prevention of lead poisoning.

"You can rest assured," he added, "we would not have gotten that grant if there were any problems."

Lead in the Water

June 3, 2018

City left lead-poisoned kids at risk, report says

By Daniel Bice and Mary Spicuzza,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

A damning state report finds Milwaukee's lead poisoning prevention program has failed to take even some of the most basic steps to protect the city's children.

The draft report by the state Department of Health Services looked at 108 lead-poisoning cases reported to the city's troubled Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program between 2012 and 2017.

It found more than 90% of the cases were closed before the amount of lead in kids' blood had dropped to levels deemed safe by the state. Some of these children, in fact, still had dangerously high lead levels.

Regulators also said the city failed to do full risk assessments



Part of a kit used to test for lead paint.

— or at least provide documentation — of possible lead hazards at the homes of lead-poisoned children in any of the cases under review. These assessments should include visual inspections, testing for lead hazards and corrective orders.

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In a quarter of the cases, there was no record that an investigator even visited the primary residence of a child with elevated levels of lead.

And, more broadly, the city's basic protocol for intervening in cases involving lead-poisoned children doesn't meet the minimum requirements set by state law, according to the report, which was obtained by the Journal Sentinel.

Bruce Lanphear, a leading health sciences expert at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, said Milwaukee residents should "absolutely" be concerned by the findings in the state report.

"Clearly, there are problems within the program itself in terms of following through with children who have clear-cut lead poisoning," Lanphear said, pointing to issues of documentation, nursing oversight and environmental inspections.

Lanphear said many health departments are failing to keep up with new guidelines calling for greater emphasis on lead poisoning prevention. But he said the state report shows that Milwaukee has more serious management issues than most.

The findings represent a stunning reversal for a program often touted in the past by local and state officials as a national model.

"Milwaukee certainly isn't

an example to look to, but in years past it was," said Ald. Michael Murphy. "But something obviously changed in the management within the Health Department, and it resulted in these terrible outcomes for children."

Mayor Tom Barrett's administration has been given until June 30 to develop a plan to correct the problems identified by the state.

The state also ordered Milwaukee officials to review all 491 lead-poisoning cases reported to the city from 2012 to 2017 to make sure the children received nursing care and thorough inspections and removal of lead hazards from their houses.

"DHS found a number of children who did not receive required case management and follow-up, and properties that did not receive the environmental investigations and remediation needed to ensure a lead-safe environment," the report concludes.

Interim Health Commissioner Patricia McManus said in a statement, "I concur with the findings of the state's audit of the City of Milwaukee Health Department's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (CLPPP). The health and safety of the children in Milwaukee must be our first concern. I remain committed to working with the state to improve our lead program and ensure we are

in compliance with state laws and obligations.”

“Commissioner McManus will not be making any comments or submitting any statements,” said city Health Department spokeswoman Clarene Mitchell.

Widely used in water pipes until the 1950s and in the solder connecting copper piping until the 1980s, lead can flake into drinking water, damaging a child’s growth and ability to learn.

Each year, 25,000 Milwaukee children are tested for lead poisoning and an average of 3,000 per year are found to have elevated levels in their blood. Lead paint is widely considered to be the primary source of lead poisoning in Milwaukee.

The state’s top public health agency launched its review of the Milwaukee Health Department earlier this year, following the sudden exit of former health commissioner Bevan Baker amid revelations about serious problems facing the city’s lead programs.

A report released by the city in January found that staffing shortages, inadequate training, high turnover and poor coordination contributed to the failure by its lead prevention program to follow up with thousands of families who had lead-poisoned children — or at least failed to document that work.

Barrett said the new state

review confirmed many of those findings from the January report.

“That’s why we have invested so much effort in corrective action, and we continue to prioritize the health of children in Milwaukee to make sure we are doing everything that is appropriate,” the mayor said.

Karen McKeown, state health officer and administrator of public health at the state Department of Health Services, said the city has been “very transparent” throughout the review.

Still, McKeown said, “anytime we see children with elevated lead levels we want them to receive appropriate follow-up, and so if that’s not happening that is certainly concerning.

“Our guidance would say that you should follow a child longer than they were following,” McKeown added.

The city program has two basic components — public health nurses who monitor and ensure treatment for children with elevated lead levels in their blood, and environmental investigators who identify potential sources of lead in homes and issue corrective orders.

The 14-page state report found problems in both areas. The state looked at about one-fifth of the cases reported to the city during the six-year period under review.

In the nursing program, the state said the case openings and closures “did not follow minimum state requirements.” In particular, the report said:

- The city could provide complete files in only 46% of the 108 cases. Seven cases had neither a computer nor a paper file.
- Overall, 16 lead-poisoned children had no home visit from a public health nurse or a health services assistant.
- Of the 70 cases that were officially completed and closed, 64 did not meet the state’s minimum requirement for closure. That standard requires a child have two tests, taken six months apart, in which the lead level is less than 15 micrograms per deciliter of blood.
- In 30 cases, children had blood lead ranging from 15 to 36.3 micrograms when the case was closed. In 11 other cases, the child’s blood level increased to 15 or more micrograms after the case was closed but it was not then reopened.

The report also found that in mid-2016, the city appeared to de-emphasize cases of children with lead levels of 15 to 19.9 micrograms, though that is required under state law.

The state reviewed 12 such cases referred to the city after that date. The city provided no public health nurse visits in 11 of those cases. The one child who did receive home visits from a nurse got that referral only after

the child’s lead level topped 20 micrograms.

“These children, beginning around June 1, 2016, were no longer being provided the environmental investigations and PHN (public health nursing) case management required for a child with an identified EBLL (elevated blood lead level),” the report said.

The city’s environmental program also had its share of problems.

For instance, the report found:

- More than one-fifth of the cases had no computer notes or a paper file for the primary address of a child with lead poisoning.
- A quarter of the initial primary addresses of lead-poisoned children had no record of an environmental investigation being conducted. The same was true with half of the new primary addresses and supplemental addresses for these Milwaukee kids.
- None of the 108 cases reviewed by the state had documentation showing that a full lead risk assessment had been conducted for the homes of lead-poisoned children. There were no completed clearance reports in any of these cases, either.
- Lead abatement orders in more than a quarter of the cases were closed without proof that the matters had been dealt with.

In another 13 homes, investigators found lead hazards but issued no orders.

“Reviewers found that many files did not have enough documentation to determine if hazards were found by the environmental investigator,” the report said. “Conclusions could not be drawn about the status of a property.”

Beyond that, the report says many corrective orders included only window work and porches, even though pictures in the file showed deteriorated paint and dust wipes indicated more lead hazards.

The city chose not to do an environmental assessment on the home of one child referred to Child Protective Services. Another case was closed when a new owner didn’t comply with existing orders.

Also, the report said health

service assistants appeared to be ineffective in some cases and may have delayed the decline of one child’s blood lead level.

“No single environmental investigation file reviewed by DHS was complete and able to fully support the actions and decisions of the MHD investigators,” the report said in its summary.

Murphy said he was frustrated things don’t seem to be improving at the beleaguered agency.

“Now the question is, since the report by the Health Department was just issued in January, have the recommendations of that report and findings been followed up upon ... and unfortunately I don’t think they have,” Murphy said. “Progress has not been to the level that you would want to see as it relates to the health care of these children.”

Lead in the Water

August 18, 2018

Twins hospitalized for lead poisoning sent back to unsafe home

By Mary Spicuzza, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Twins with lead poisoning so severe they were hospitalized were released and sent home to a property with chipping and peeling lead paint because of a Milwaukee Health Department nurse, city records show.

Those actions put the children at serious risk of additional lead poisoning, according to a September 2017 written warning for Margot Manassa, the city's public health nursing coordinator.

"The employee informed the hospital that the property was clear even though the inspector informed the nurse that there were lead hazards; windows and entrance door had chipping and peeling lead paint," the



Chipping, peeling lead paint is one source of lead poisoning.

warning reads. "The employee failed to document any conversation with hospital staff or lead risk assessor."

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Manassa spent two days at a health fair in August 2017 rather than providing follow-up care for the twins and their family, the warning says.

“The employee informed Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin that she would be out and there was limited staff for follow-up case management and investigation,” it reads. “The employee decided to attend a setup of a health fair and a second day at the event in place of providing nursing case management to a high-risk child.”

The twins’ lead levels were so high they were in the hospital to receive chelation therapy, a medical procedure used to remove metals like lead and mercury.

Despite the seriousness of their poisoning, the city failed to keep complete records and there was “no education to the parent” offered, the warning says.

“The charts for the pair of lead poisoned chelated twins are; incomplete, illegible and show that no case management was conducted,” it reads.

Manassa was later suspended for five days in April.

The suspension notice listed a number of problems with Manassa’s job performance, including failing to follow up with lead-poisoned children, failing to send follow-up letters to families of children with elevated blood lead levels and

failing to assign cases.

The records were obtained by the Journal Sentinel under the state’s open records law.

Interim Health Commissioner Patricia McManus cannot comment on personnel issues, the department said in a statement.

The statement also said Manassa was not available for an interview.

Previous problems

This was not the first time Manassa has received warnings over her job performance.

In December 2007, she was reprimanded for arriving to work late.

In June 2008, she received a verbal warning for calling in sick more than an hour after she was supposed to show up at work at the Keenan Health Center.

Later that year, in December 2008, Manassa received a written warning for using a Health Department computer “for personal use during regular work hours logging into fark.com, CraigsLists, African Gray Parrots, etc, which interferes with the performance of the employee’s job duties and responsibilities.”

But her latest problems were the most severe.

The 2017 written warning states that Manassa was in violation of City Service Commission rules. The document

said she “has been guilty of acts which amount to an act of insubordination” and “is incompetent or inefficient in the performance of or fails or refuses to perform the duties required for the position.”

Manassa isn’t the only Health Department staffer who has been disciplined because of problems with the city’s lead poisoning prevention programs.

Lisa Lien, who was then serving as the city’s home environmental health manager, was suspended for 10 days in December after city officials found she was “ineffective,” “insubordinate” and “incompetent or inefficient” in her work for the department.

“The magnitude of the injustice served to the children of the City of Milwaukee is immense,” reads Lien’s suspension notice, which was signed in December by former Health Commissioner Bevan Baker.

At the time, Lien accused the city of using her as a scapegoat.

The city’s Health Department has been reeling for months since news broke that

it failed to provide follow-up services to the families of thousands of children with lead poisoning — or at least failed to document those efforts. Problems also emerged with a federally funded city program aimed at reducing lead dangers, especially lead paint risks, in city homes.

Problems with the city’s lead programs led to Baker’s sudden resignation in January.

A report released soon after his departure detailed a wide range of problems with the department, including staffing shortages, inadequate training, high turnover and poor coordination.

McManus, who was picked by the Common Council to lead the troubled department in February, has recently said problems with Milwaukee’s lead programs were just the “canary in the mine” for the entire department.

The department has also faced problems with its programs involving family planning, breast cancer screenings and testing for sexually transmitted infections.

Lead in the Water

September 1, 2018

5 homes in 5 months — City's slow response to lead safety

By Mary Spicuzza, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Only five homes with lead-poisoned children living in them were made lead safe by the City of Milwaukee during the first five months of the year.

Those five homes are among 46 properties where lead hazards were removed by or under the direction of the city between January and early June, according to information obtained through an open records request.

"That's just unacceptable," Ald. Michael Murphy said when provided the numbers.

"It's very disappointing, because where children are found with elevated blood levels in their home, those should be our No. 1 priorities," Murphy said. "We should be going into



Hiram Rodriguez, with Questell's Home Improvement, scrapes lead paint chips from the inside of a window in a Milwaukee home in 2005 as part of the city's lead abatement program.

those homes and remediating those cases as quickly as possible."

The Milwaukee Health Department has been struggling for months.

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Bevan Baker, the city's former health commissioner, was ousted in January after news broke about problems with the agency's programs aimed at preventing lead poisoning among Milwaukee children.

Patricia McManus has been serving as interim commissioner since February.

McManus did not respond to a request for an interview.

The Common Council is scheduled to vote next week on confirming Jeanette Kowalik as the new health commissioner. Mayor Tom Barrett picked Kowalik to lead the troubled agency in July.

A special Public Safety and Health Committee meeting has been scheduled for Tuesday to take up the appointment, one day before the full Council is expected to meet.

Murphy said he hopes confirming Kowalik as the permanent commissioner will help build stability and improve the department's ability to help people in need.

"All these promises were made, all these commitments, all these testimonies saying this was our priority. And the numbers don't reflect that," Murphy said. "It's pretty shocking."

In February, federal officials issued a "stop work order" for the city's program aimed at reducing lead hazards in homes. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development at the time called on the city to immediately cease work funded by its Lead Hazard Reduction grant, citing issues identified by a monitoring visit.

The letter said the issues, which included owners completing work found to be "non-compliant and unsafe," needed to be "addressed immediately."

The Health Department in February called it a "temporary pause."

"We will work closely with HUD to implement processes that will allow us to better respond to and help families prevent lead poisoning in our community," the department said at the time.

The agency's problems go beyond its Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.

The Journal Sentinel has also reported on troubles with Milwaukee's cancer screening and family planning programs, as well as limits placed on its sexually transmitted infection testing.

Lead in the Water

September 12, 2018

Health officials hid lead issues

By Mary Spicuzza and Daniel Bice,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Four months before widespread problems with the city's lead poisoning prevention program burst into the open, then-Health Commissioner Bevan Baker was warned by a staffer that they would face serious consequences if the public learned just how deep the troubles ran.

Records obtained by the Journal Sentinel reveal a flurry of text messages between Baker and Tiffany Barta, the director of nursing, on Sept. 27, 2017, after the city health agency inadvertently sent a lead-poisoned child from the hospital back to a home full of lead hazards. The mistake was not made public.

"I'm only doing this for you," Barta texted, "because if this



Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett (right) and Health Commissioner Bevan K. Baker.

gets out, that the lead program is this messed up! We will be held to the grindstone!

"I will work very hard; weekends, nights (you can relate), no compensation, etc. I could say no, but I don't want you to answer to the crap they will serve you across the street," concluded Barta, who was put

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in charge of the lead poisoning prevention program earlier this year.

Baker responded: “Tiffany, thanks for letting me know. I’m here to help. It’s clear you need my involvement. ... Together we will clean up and clear out this mess.”

In January, Baker abruptly resigned his job as news broke that his department failed to provide services to families of thousands of children who had tested positive for lead — or at least document those efforts. Troubles also emerged with a city program aimed at reducing lead hazards, mainly paint, in homes.

Since his exit, city, state and federal investigations have portrayed the Health Department as a deeply dysfunctional agency that has failed to take even some of the most basic steps to protect the city’s children.

Baker has had little to say about the controversy, offering a vague defense of his tenure as health chief since 2004 and of the lead poisoning prevention program, once deemed in the past as a national model.

Mayor Tom Barrett has said he learned of the problems within his agency only in late 2017.

“Today’s release of texts confirms what the mayor has been saying for months,” Jeff Fleming, a spokesman for the Barrett administration, said

Tuesday. “Once he learned of the issues of the Health Department, he acted immediately, made the information public, and began the work to address the problems.”

The text messages obtained through open records requests show that Barta was working behind the scenes with Tasha Jenkins, another health official, to come up with a proposal to overhaul the lead program as early as mid-2017.

“As an FYI, I will be submitting to you a plan for the restoration of the lead program, to also include lead and pregnancy,” Barta wrote Baker on Aug. 16, 2017.

“Additionally, I will provide a plan that Tasha and I have worked on that will put MHD in a good light. This plan can be used to deflect away from all of the internal/external nonsense and to refocus on the efforts on what is important to the constituent of the city! We’ve got this ...”

It was clear from the text messages that these health officials knew there were problems with the program much earlier than previously disclosed. A state report found earlier this year that the city was closing more than 90% of its lead poisoning cases before the amount of lead in kids’ blood had dropped to levels deemed safe by the state.

Barta was particularly

critical of Lisa Lien, who was then in charge of the lead program. She has since resigned from her city job after being suspended in December after city officials found she was “ineffective,” “insubordinate” and “incompetent or inefficient” in her work.

“It is my understanding that there are no policies in lead, except the ones that I used five years ago, but Lisa made changes that were never written, so I don’t know what the hell they’re doing now!” Barta wrote Baker in September 2017.

Lien is not the only health official that Barta criticizes in her texts. She also referred to a trio of Baker critics as, alternately, “3 clowns” and “3 stooges,” but it is not clear who these individuals are.

But Barta couldn’t have been more laudatory of Baker.

“I want to personally thank you for taking the lead on answering the council’s questions concerning nursing. I must say, that you are quite fascinating to watch as you navigate and ‘work’ the ‘council’! you are a great teacher and mentor ... I’ve learned and continued to grow from you! I’m in awe!”

Barta even suggested creating a program called “B squared,” presumably in honor of her boss.

In an Oct. 13 text, she told Baker that she would provide him a “brief lead program update.”

“Also, I will begin the write up (of) a project plan of my works (your vision operationized, plus global tendrils), this weekend,” she wrote. “I’m hopeful that within two weeks, you will have a draft! I’m super excited and will call this collection of works MHD Project B squared.”

Baker responded with a smiley face emoji and a brief note: “Great Tiffany. Thanks.”

The Journal Sentinel first asked for the texts between Baker and Barta in early March. But city officials sat on the request for months, citing an ongoing personnel investigation. Officials timed the release of the texts to the Journal Sentinel so they could also provide them to members of the Common Council, where the Health Department has been a contentious issue since Baker’s departure.

The council rejected Barrett’s original pick to serve as interim health director and chose Patricia McManus, head of the Black Health Coalition of Wisconsin, for the post.

Just days before Baker resigned his post, Barta assured him that the burgeoning controversy would pass.

“WE WILL get through this ... we may come out with battle scars and limping, but we will survive this!” she texted on Jan. 6. “You just need to tell me what you want and need, and I will try to bring it to pass.”

Lead in the Water

September 22, 2018

Staffer stalled cleanups of homes with poisoned kids

By **Mary Spicuzza and Daniel Bice**,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

A top Milwaukee Health Department staffer scaled back efforts to clean up homes with lead-poisoned children living in them, newly released records say.

During the last two years — 2016 and 2017 — the city didn't clean up a single house with lead-poisoned children living in it, the records also show.

Those were among the findings documented in hundreds of pages of records linked to personnel investigations into two former leaders of the city's troubled lead poisoning prevention program. The documents were released by the city Friday following Journal Sentinel

records requests.

The documents blame former health staffers Lisa Lien and Richard Gaeta for creating a toxic work environment full of bullying, intimidation and harassment. Following the personnel investigations, Lien resigned and Gaeta was fired.

Lien, then the city's home environmental health manager, had previously gotten a 10-day suspension last year. Both Lien and Gaeta were placed on paid administrative leave in March.

Gaeta's discharge notice accuses him of "insubordination" and "offensive conduct or language." It also says he was "incompetent or inefficient" in

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doing his job as Milwaukee's environmental field supervisor.

Without authorization, Gaeta imposed additional fines on contractors hired by the city to clean up lead hazards in homes, the notice says. His bosses say he was "not being entirely honest" about the program, it adds.

Gaeta is fighting his firing, records show.

Lien has said that the department was facing severe staffing shortages, but was not mismanaged.

Bullying claim

Another city investigation conducted by the law firm Crivello Carlson found credible evidence that Lien "harassed, bullied and created a hostile work environment in general" while heading the lead program. Four workers reported they had been intimidated and retaliated against by Lien. Several said they felt the need to seek counseling or therapy.

That investigation focused on Lien's treatment of an unnamed nurse from West Africa, who claimed that Lien made fun of her because of her race, once threatened to "destroy" the nurse and accused the employee of providing a co-worker with "sexual favors."

Jasmyne Baynard, the Crivello Carlson attorney who wrote the 30-page report, said she couldn't corroborate those

accusations. But her report said Lien failed to give that nurse the training needed to do her job and treated her differently than others by, for instance, ordering her to follow strict lunch rules that ran counter to agency policy.

"Throughout my initial interview with (redacted), she was extremely emotional and began to cry when talking about her alleged negative treatment at the Health Department," Baynard wrote. "She said she has been traumatized by the way Ms. Lien treated her."

Lien denied all of the allegations in her interview with Baynard. Lien accused the nurse of being guilty of "insubordination."

The city's own investigation says Lien shifted the focus of the program away from cleaning up homes of lead-poisoned children.

"It is clear that by 2017, Ms. Lien reduced the resources dedicated to the investigation of (lead-poisoned kids') units," the report says. "However, it is difficult to understand why this was done."

Cleaning up the homes of those children is a priority under state and federal guidelines.

"Clearly, the environmental investigation and abatement of addresses in which a child with an (elevated blood lead level) resides is not only required

by statute,” the investigation reads. “But is based upon the research related to the fact that children who are lead poisoned should be removed from further hazards as a priority measure.”

The city failed to clean up any homes with lead-poisoned children living in them in 2016 and 2017. During that time, the number of citations for lead hazards issued by the city dropped from 93 in 2016 to none in 2017.

During the two previous years, 2014 and 2015, only two homes with poisoned children were cleaned up by the city each year, while 66 and 132 citations were issued, respectively.

That was a sharp decrease from 2013 when 13 homes with lead-poisoned children were cleaned up and 60 citations were issued by the city.

Lien is one of a handful of health staffers and former staffers who have faced discipline in recent months as the city reels from a crisis linked to its handling of programs aimed at preventing lead poisoning among Milwaukee children.

The crisis led to the resignation of former Health Commissioner Bevan Baker in January. Baker was expected to testify at City Hall Monday, but canceled late Friday, citing advice from his attorney.

Common Council President Ashanti Hamilton said the

council “has not ruled out the use of its subpoena power” to compel Baker to testify.

The documents released Friday portray a department plagued by serious problems, including poisoned children being released from the hospital back into unsafe homes.

They also describe allegations of unfair treatment of contractors.

“Contractors stated that there was intimidation and harassment, that some contractors received preferential treatment, and that Mr. Gaeta would make up rules without any authority,” his four-page discharge notice reads.

Despite the complaints, Gaeta said he had a positive relationship with contractors.

Several staffers in the lead program said they were “traumatized” by his management style and avoided dealing with him.

“When asked for specific instances of problems with Mr. Gaeta, some employees expressed that they did not want to speak about him for fear of retaliation,” it said.

He again told investigators that he considered his relationship with staffers to be “friendly and cordial.”

Journal Sentinel reporter Bill Glauber contributed to this report.

Lead in the Water

March 7, 2018

HIV, Syphilis cluster found in city

By James E. Causey and Mary Spicuzza,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

At least 125 people — including some high school students — have contracted HIV, syphilis or both in one of the largest sexually transmitted infection “clusters” discovered in Milwaukee, health care advocates confirmed to the Journal Sentinel.

Three local babies were also born with syphilis last year, health officials said.

“This is an epidemic people are not talking about enough, and it leads to people taking unnecessary risks,” said Melissa Ugland, a public health consultant who works with a number of local nonprofit organizations that focus on public health.

There has been no announcement to the general public from the Milwaukee Health



An HIV test kit

Department as of Tuesday.

Fewer than 10% of the 125 people who tested positive are Milwaukee Public Schools students, but health care experts anticipate that the numbers could increase as more people come forward.

A cluster is an aggregation of disease closely grouped in time and place. This cluster was identified as such because

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the people in it could all be connected, and were in contact with each other during a 12-month, identifiable period, Ugland said.

Most of those in the group are men and 45% were HIV positive, Ugland and other health care advocates said.

Ugland said she did not know which school or schools were impacted by the cluster but she said it could be several.

In a statement, MPS said the Health Department informed the district that the entire city is experiencing an increase in sexually transmitted infections in young people ages 15 to 24.

“Because schools have a significant number of students in the 15-18 age group, we are working with the Milwaukee Health Department, in a collaborative and preventive effort, to share information with young people in middle schools and high schools to keep them healthy and to protect their health,” the statement said.

The number of those affected may grow.

“(The cluster) was still considered ongoing; they were continuing to try to track down some folks,” Ugland said.

Bevan Baker, the city’s former health commissioner, met with Mayor Tom Barrett to brief him about the cluster in December and again in early January, about a week before Baker resigned over troubles

with Milwaukee’s lead poisoning prevention programs.

The Milwaukee Health Department on Thursday launched a series of advertisements promoting free, confidential STD testing at the city’s Keenan Health Center and Northwest Health Center, health officials said Tuesday.

Public health advocates are labeling the cluster a “sentinel event” because of the number of young people becoming HIV positive and the fact that a babies were born with syphilis.

“It’s a really big deal,” Ugland said.

Health officials first became aware of a growing problem with sexually transmitted infections in mid-December after several people reported having HIV or syphilis symptoms, sources said.

When people tested positive, they were referred for care and interviewed about their sexual history. Officials attempt to find out who those infected had sex with and reach out to those people to try to get them tested and in for treatment.

While some people in the cluster have been very upfront with information on the partner or partners they had sexual contact with, others have been hesitant to give out names, advocates said.

Many people fail to come forward out of fear of being stigmatized, said Gary Hollander, a

community volunteer and former CEO of Diverse and Resilient, a grass-roots organization that gives a voice to LGBT issues.

When dealing with a cluster this big, it's important for health officials to move quickly because these viruses and bacterial infections can spread fast, Hollander said.

While there are several different signs and stages of syphilis, the infection can be treated with medications without any long-term effects if caught early enough.

Syphilis symptoms can develop 10 to 90 days after contact but they usually occur within three weeks with a firm, round, painless sore around the original site of the infection. People who don't get that treated might get additional symptoms, such as a rash in the palm of the hands or feet.

As for HIV, Hollander stressed that since the virus is no longer viewed as the "death sentence" it was during the 1980s and 1990s people have become lax and stopped doing the things that caused STIs to drop, including wearing a condom during sex, knowing their status, talking to their partners and making sexual health a part of their health routine.

"That's the unfortunate part," he said.

People are living longer, productive lives with HIV, and new

medications like pre-exposure prophylaxis (or PrEP) have been shown to prevent the spread entirely.

HIV symptoms vary and it can take several years for the symptoms to present itself, thus making it easy for the person living without symptoms to spread HIV without knowing it.

"The best way to know is to get tested," Hollander said.

Ugland said when MPS discovered the news they immediately had health care professionals in to talk with students.

Within 24 hours of learning about the cluster, Ugland said, MPS Superintendent Darienne Driver was on the phone to get people in to talk with students.

"She was on it," Ugland said.

Both Ugland and Hollander said it was important not to stigmatize young people or the school or schools they attend.

While not having sex is the best way to prevent STIs, Ugland said, some young people don't have that choice in part due to crimes like sex trafficking.

Hollander said news of the cluster should be a wake-up call for local and state officials as well as the public that STIs remain a public health crisis, much like the flu, mumps or anything else that would lead the local news.

When it comes to STIs, Milwaukee leads the nation in several categories. The Milwaukee

area ranked first in the nation in gonorrhea rates; fourth in chlamydia; and is ranked as one of the worst places for HIV for men of color under the age of 25.

According to the Milwaukee Health Department, people ages 15 to 24 make up 37.4% of the HIV cases in Milwaukee, while people ages 20 to 29 make up 57.1% of the syphilis cases.

Last month, Angela Hagy, director of Disease Control and Environmental Health for the city, stressed that the community must start a conversation about condom use and reduce the stigma around STI testing.

Hagy made her statement during National Condom Day as STIs were reported at epidemic levels here and across the nation.

“Locally, data indicates that half of all sexually active people will get an STI before the age of 25,” she said. “Condom use is an effective and essential way to prevent the spread of STIs for sexually active individuals.”

For the first nine months of 2017, STIs cost nearly \$11 million in Milwaukee to treat in health costs, according to records from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“In 2016, the Health Department’s budget from the City of Milwaukee was \$13.6 million. In the first nine months of 2017, STIs in Milwaukee cost individuals and health care officials who treated them \$10.7 million in medications and health care staff time,” Ugland said. “That’s huge.”

Lead in the Water

July 7, 2018

Milwaukee scales back family planning services despite spike in STDs

By Mary Spicuzza, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Despite a troubling spike in sexually transmitted diseases in Milwaukee, city officials have dramatically scaled back family planning services.

Family planning — which aims to help people avoid unintended pregnancies with contraceptives and other services — had been provided at two city clinics, the Southside Health Center and Keenan Health Center.

But those services were disrupted in January, Milwaukee Health Department staffer Angela Hagy told members of the Common Council this week.

“Family planning services stopped altogether at the

Southside Health Center, and we’ve had reduced family planning services at Keenan,” Hagy testified during a Tuesday committee meeting. “So at Keenan, we do provide STI (sexually transmitted infection) testing, but we do not provide comprehensive contraception.”

The sudden drop-off in services was linked to a contract with provider HealthFirst, which ended in January, Hagy said.

She added, “We’re looking to restart those services.”

Hagy, the city’s director of disease control and environmental health, later added that condoms are still available at the Keenan center. That clinic also makes referrals to

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Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, she said.

When it comes to STIs, Milwaukee leads the nation in several categories. The Milwaukee area ranked first in the nation in gonorrhea rates, fourth in chlamydia and is ranked as one of the worst places for HIV for men of color under the age of 25.

Earlier this year, the Journal Sentinel reported that officials had discovered a network of people with HIV, syphilis or both in a large sexually transmitted infection “cluster.”

Several members of the city’s Finance and Personnel Committee expressed shock and disappointment over the news.

“I mean we have an explosion of STDs, do we not, in this city?” Ald. Michael Murphy asked during the meeting. “And we’re not providing family planning services for seven months on the south side of Milwaukee, which has one of the highest rates of poverty?”

It’s unclear how many people have been affected by the city’s reduction in family planning — in part because Milwaukee hasn’t been tracking those who weren’t able to get those services.

“There was some disagreement among managers who were overseeing the program, so the systems weren’t set up to track that information,” Hagy said.

Ald. Russell W. Stamper II called for the Health Department to report back to council members.

“We’re going to have to monitor this,” Stamper said. “We can’t continue to be ranked so high in STIs and we have no way of seeing if we’re doing anything about it. What are we doing?”

Tuesday’s debate about family planning and sexually transmitted diseases came shortly before another heated meeting at City Hall where a city official told aldermen Milwaukee had “consistently failed to use its enforcement powers” to protect children by removing lead paint risks in homes.

Ald. Chantia Lewis said she was especially disappointed that two positions related to STDs created in the budget due to a measure she sponsored had not yet been filled.

Lewis called on Health Department staffers to urgently address the city’s problems with sexually transmitted infections, even as it deals with its ongoing lead crisis.

“We still need to operate as if the house is on fire,” Lewis said. “We still need to put that fire out while we’re working on other things.”

Interim Health Commissioner Patricia McManus told committee members that she needs her staff to update her, adding that she didn’t know the

Southside Health Center was supposed to be providing family planning services.

“I’m going to be real clear, I had no idea that that’s what was supposed to have been happening,” McManus said.

Mayor Tom Barrett voiced frustration with the situation, saying he had learned of it from

reading about it in the Journal Sentinel.

“So that’s disappointing, obviously,” Barrett said.

He added, “What I intend to do is to do everything we can to make sure that we get the train back on the track at the Health Department. That’s what my No. 1 goal is right now.”

Lead in the Water

July 10, 2018



The 19th Annual Susan G. Komen Southeast Wisconsin Race for the Cure Series kicked off at the Milwaukee Art Museum last September.

Women wait for cancer screenings

By Mary Spicuzza, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

More than 100 women were left waiting for breast and cervical cancer screenings after the City of Milwaukee stopped providing those crucial services earlier this year.

Some of those women had symptoms such as lumps in their breasts, or reported pain or burning sensations, according

to documents obtained by the Journal Sentinel through an open records request.

The wait list had grown to about 110 women by last month, a Milwaukee Health Department staffer recently warned members of the Common Council.

Problems with the city's

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Wisconsin Well Women program are the latest to hit the troubled Health Department, which has been reeling after reports it failed to prevent lead poisoning among Milwaukee children.

Lisa Phillips, manager for the city's program, told members of the Finance and Personnel Committee at a June 13 meeting that clients were no longer being served at the city's Southside Health Center. Women were instead being sent to other facilities such as Aurora St. Luke's Medical Center, Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare and St. Francis Hospital, she said.

"When we're not able to provide services at Southside, the care is fragmented," Phillips testified.

The wait list, which was started in April, grew to about 110 women in two months, Phillips said during that meeting.

The Well Woman program provides cancer screenings and other services to women with little or no health insurance coverage. The program pays for mammograms, pap tests and cervical cancer screenings for high-risk women as well as other tests.

"Early detection is so critical," Ald. Michael Murphy said. "So two months can mean a big difference in a person's life."

Many of those left waiting were low-income women, he said.

"I think we need to figure out what is going wrong in that program and why we can't get this resolved," Murphy added.

He said services had been disrupted for four of the first six months of the year.

The drop-off in crucial cancer-screening services was linked to a contract with provider Healthfirst, which ended in January. As the Journal Sentinel reported last week, that contract ending also disrupted the city's family planning services.

During that June meeting, Interim Health Commissioner Patricia McManus said it was the state's decision to end the contract with Healthfirst.

A spokeswoman for Department of Health Services said state officials work to ensure women have access to screening services.

"The City of Milwaukee Health Department makes decisions regarding subcontractor arrangements in consultation with DHS," said Elizabeth Goodsitt, a DHS spokeswoman.

McManus was not available for an interview Tuesday, Health Department spokeswoman Janalle Goosby said in an email.

The department resumed cancer screenings on June 19, Goosby said.

She initially said the current wait list is now at 57, but then clarified that there is actually no

one currently on the waiting list.

“The number of 57 is the number that are already scheduled to be seen,” Goosby said.

Asked about the reason for the delay, she said: “Services for breast and cervical cancer screenings were halted when Healthfirst notified the City of Milwaukee Health Department that they were terminating their contract, effective January 1, 2018.”

Murphy expressed concern that women were left waiting, noting that many of them are low-income and “the most vulnerable” because they don’t have other choices for treatment.

“It’s shocking,” Murphy said. “We need to get the Health Department in shape, because right now the community is

suffering as a result of bad decisions.”

Murphy said poor management at the agency was to blame.

“Healthfirst got dropped out of the mix and there was no planning to have anything in place to replace it,” Murphy said. “It’s just basically poor management.”

Family planning — which aims to help people avoid unintended pregnancies with contraceptives and other services — had been provided at two city clinics, the Southside Health Center and Keenan Health Center. Family planning services stopped altogether at the Southside Health Center, and family planning services were reduced at Keenan.